

Self Harm - The most hidden violence

By Lance Haworth

In this short information sheet you will learn about self harm and how to deal with it as a topic or a medical event in an AVP workshop. Don't worry as an AVP Facilitator you are trained in probably the most important skill to help alleviate the suffering of self harmers, **the ability to LISTEN!**

One of the most pernicious myths about self harm is that it is a teenage attention seeking behaviour. This is wrong in two ways, self harm affects people of all ages (though 60% of people start in their teenage years and many of those continue through their lifetime) and most people who self harm go to great lengths to hide it from their peers. You will have known a self harmer in your life and they probably did not tell you, either through shame, fear of being locked up for "being mad" or any other number of reasons personal to them. The person who wrote this article is one of them.

The NICE guidelines state that care-givers should be aware that each person that self harms does so for individual reasons and that each episode of self harm should be treated in its own right as a person's reason for self harming may vary from episode to episode. This is important to understand, self harm is as unique as the people that do it, both in method of harm and the reasons for it.

It is now appropriate to look at what behaviours are considered self harm and what are just some of the reasons behind it. To demonstrate these behaviours and feelings here is testimony from three self harmers taken from "Healing the hurt within" 3rd edition by Jan Sutton.

"Zoe feels depressed, empty and numb. She lacks the energy to copy with the day ahead of her. The world around her seems fuzzy and unreal, almost as if she is wrapped up in cotton wool, and she cannot think straight. She lights up a cigarette, and starts burning circles on her thigh. When she begins to feel the pain from the burns the haze lifts and she feels different - *she can think straight, she feels energised, more alive, more real and she is ready to face the day*".

"A prisoner talking about when they were locked up. "When I had nothing better to do and 23 hours per day in my cell, I mutilated myself - calling the results, not tattoos but "*angry art*". It was a coping mechanism. If I had not practised this form of self-injury, I might have lashed physically at either a fellow inmate or one of the screws. However, fear of losing privileges, parole etc held me back but the *rage and destructive energy within me had to be released in some direction*. It was a way of self-expression when there was no one to whom I felt able to confide my inner feelings to. Indeed, I doubt if, at the time, I was even able to identify and verbalise how I was really feeling, because my vocabulary was very limited."

"Arabella is having a flashback. She is seeing vivid images in her mind of traumatic events that she experienced as a young child. She is terrified and feels very small. Her heart is pounding; she is sweating and shaking. She grabs a knife from the kitchen drawer and makes a cut on her left forearm. As soon as she sees her blood flowing, *the frightening pictures fade from view. She feels calmer and safe.* After carefully dressing her wound and cleaning the knife, she makes herself a hot drink, switches on her favourite record, *curls up on the settee and quickly drifts off into a deep and peaceful sleep.*"

Take time to think how those true stories of self harm made you feel, whatever it was it was not wrong! Many people feel some of these emotions; shock, anger, revulsion, fear, panic and pity others just find it hard to comprehend that a human could do this to themselves.

Now we will look at what to do when you encounter self harm and self harm ideations (that's thoughts about doing self harm to yourself) in a workshop. Workshops as you know can be very emotionally charged places at times, this and the fact that the self harmer is away from their comfort zones physically does increase the chance of self harm at the workshop or at home afterwards. As I said at the start you are equipped with the best skill anyone without a medical mental health qualification can have, the ability to listen and to do so in a skilled and caring manner.

When preparing for a workshop it is important that you know where the first aid kit is and refresh your understanding of what can trigger self harm (see list at end of document). Also during the tree of violence exercise make sure that self harm and suicide end up on the tree to show that this is something that can be talked about in the workshop.

When being talked to about self harm thoughts there are some important things to remember;

- ✓ Respect the honesty and trust that the person has shown in telling you this! It can be very humiliating to talk about to others about self harm.
- ✓ Show your concern for their emotional pain not just the physical injuries.
- ✓ Remember confidentiality is very important as this is a medical issue.
- ✓ Remember the longer you talk about this subject the more likely you are to trigger a self harm act. So resist the urge to "get them to talk about it", let them end the conversation when they want to.
- ✓ A good question to ask is "What can I do to help you be safe?"

Beyond just practicing your listening skills here are some helpful short term responses to self harm acts (as well as getting the first aid kit out and letting them treat their wounds if they want to) provided by Bristol Crisis Service for Women (BCSW) but equally apply to men;

- ✓ Show that you see and care about the person in pain behind the self-injury.
- ✓ Show concern for the injuries themselves. Whatever 'front' she may put on, a person who has injured herself is usually deeply distressed, ashamed and vulnerable. You have an opportunity to offer compassion and respect – something different from what she may be used to receiving.
- ✓ Make it clear that self-injury is alright to talk about and can be understood. If you feel upset by the injuries, it may be best to be honest about this, while being clear that you can deal with your own feelings and don't blame her for them.
- ✓ Convey your respect for the person's efforts to survive, even though this involves hurting herself. She has done the best she could. (This is very important as many people use self harm to stop them from committing suicide or performing other "anti-social", dangerous or even criminal acts, such as those the prisoner was worried about.)

Triggers of self harm can be as varied as the reasons and methods of self harm but many are much more common than others and here they are:-

- References to Sexual Violence (for the approximately 46% of self harmers that have been sexually abused).
- Being made to feel threatened or humiliated.
- Being made to feel that they are powerless or trapped in their current situation/location.
- Being made to feel that they have failed or that they need punishing for their actions.

References

- ❖ **NICE Guidelines on self harm 1.3.5**
- ❖ **Healing the hurt within 3rd edition by Jan Sutton**
- ❖ **Advice to Bristol Crisis Service for Women volunteers**

Useful Resources

- ❖ **LifeSIGNS (Self-injury Guidance & Network Support)**
<http://www.lifesigns.org.uk/>
- ❖ **MIND** <http://www.mind.org.uk/>
- ❖ **National Self-Harm Network** <http://www.nshn.co.uk/>
- ❖ **The Survivors Trust** <http://www.thesurvivorstrust.org/>